

## Joshua 3-4 – Crossing the Jordan

Before I begin, I'm going to read the last 2 verses of chapter 4

This is what the Israelites were to say to their children, and their children's children

Verse 22, when they ask about this:

<sup>22</sup> tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' <sup>23</sup> For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. <sup>24</sup> He did this so that: all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God."

*Father, show us more of your power, show us more from this passage, and lead us to fear you, and see you as you truly are. Amen*

This morning I want to talk about that feeling that some people have, even some Christians have, that God has just left them to it, and that he doesn't care, isn't watching over them, and perhaps even: that he *couldn't* help them, or do anything even if he wanted to.

I wonder if you feel that way? Or have thought that way? I don't think it's that uncommon, and I guess it's easy to understand why.

One reason would be, human suffering. The Bible tells us that, sadly, suffering is a normal part of human experience, and we shouldn't expect to avoid it. And yet, somehow that doesn't seem to help – and when we suffer, or someone we love suffers, we call out to God and ask him to stop it, or change it, or alleviate it – and then if he doesn't, perhaps we think he can't, or he doesn't care?

Another reason why people might feel cut off from God would be: we can't *see* God! Even with *people*, there are times when talking on the phone, or writing a letter, just aren't good enough. Some conversations and some situations *demand* that you go and see a person face-to-face. Now, we all face hard moments at times, and God is never face-to-face with us! And I think that leads some people to struggle, and feel like he isn't there or doesn't care.

But you know what? Those feelings aren't new feelings – if you feel that way, you are the first person to do so, you won't be the last. And God has something to say to you this morning.

If you feel that way, and when you look around you at church, you see people who seem so sorted – who seem close to the Lord – who seem to find it easy to trust him. Perhaps you wonder: maybe God actually is really close to them and he's just not close to me (for whatever reason). Well God has something to say to you this morning.

In these chapters of Joshua, the people come to trust God as much as Joshua does. It's something of a transition moment: God shows his power and his tender care towards the normal everyday folks, and they trust him. No longer is it about one really godly person, the leader: Joshua. But now all the people know that God is with them and cares for them. And they are going to need to trust him and follow him, given what's coming up: This is the **map** – do you remember? The people were on the right-hand side of the Jordan – waiting to cross over to take possession of the land God is giving them. Gad, Manasseh and Ruben already have their land, but they have promised to help the other tribes in the fight that is coming.



Some spies had been sent across, particularly to Jericho, and come back with good news: the people there knew that God was giving this land to his people – and last week we heard about Rahab, an example of faith, and an example that anyone is able to join God's people – because she was an inhabitant of Jericho, and a Gentile, and a prostitute!

After hearing the report from the spies, God's people then move to the banks of the River Jordan here – waiting to cross over.

And the first lesson they learn, and that we need to learn, through these two incredible chapters is this:

### 1) God is awesomely powerful.

I don't know if you've seen any films of God doing this, and their special effects? The most recent one, and I tried to get a little clip to show everyone, was called Exodus: gods and kings. It portrayed the crossing of the red Sea after the plagues in Egypt, and with flabbergasting computer-generated special effects, we saw these walls of water, held up by hurricane winds which God had brought.



And there have been a number of films down the years which have used different effects to visualise it. Even without seeing the images on a screen, we can appreciate how completely awesome this would have been.

And in our chapter, for Joshua and God's people instead of Moses this time, God dries up the river Jordan so that they can cross. An incredible display of power! But we shouldn't picture walls of water and a tiny narrow passage between them: listen to what it says:

Verse 15 "Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge,<sup>16</sup> the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away [*imagine a bit like a dam, which is easy to remember because it continues: this happened*], at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan,

skip to v17 The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.

So they don't walk through the passageway with walls of water on the left and right: but what their experience is, is no less miraculous, and no less an incredible sign of God's power. They get to the water's edge and prepare to cross. Remember: there aren't any bridges, and it isn't a question of them just walking a little bit further north so they can cross a big steel walkway! Rivers were hard to cross – especially wide ones! Especially in flood!

So we are to picture: The priests carrying the ark of the covenant (a symbol of God's presence) stepping into the water walking in, and as they do that the water just stops flowing from upstream! The river dries up and the whole nation is able to walk across, remarkable! They would have been looking at each other and thinking did we really just see that, is this really happening? I bet some of them would have danced and skipped their way across, and some of the children would have run and played – as the people delighted in and enjoyed this miracle – they crossed over.

It was a truly **powerful** miracle, and something that the people would not easily forget – and not something that we ought to explain away through coincidence, or weather – God did a miracle! Amazing! And that's not a huge surprise – because God is an incredibly powerful God.

Now, I just want to pause for a moment and address the issue of miracles. Because the Bible describes many miracles, especially important in the life of Jesus, and many people these days simply find them unbelievable, and discount them as untrue or gross exaggeration.

First I want to point out that the bible doesn't claim they are normal. So no matter how often you might hear Christians talk about them: water into wine, feeding 5000 people with a small packed-lunch etc... Christians *don't* think they happen every day, and they don't buy Evian instead of Merlot thinking they can do a miracle and save money at the supermarket! Christians know, and the Bible claims that these things are extraordinary.

Some people will still say “it couldn’t have happened because it breaks the laws of nature”

Well, to answer that objection I’m going to read a paragraph from Oxford professor John Lennox:

he writes: What, after all, are the laws of nature? They are our descriptions of what normally happens and they enable us to predict what *will* happen if no-one intervenes. However, God is not bound by the laws he has built:

Imagine I put £100 in my bed-side drawer last night and I put in another £100 tonight. The laws of maths say that I have £200 pounds in the drawer. If I find only £50 there tomorrow what do I conclude? That the laws of maths have been broken or the laws of England?

Clearly the laws of England. How do I know that? Because I know the laws of maths.

**They have not been broken** and that is what tells me that a thief has come in from outside. Similarly, when a genuine miracle takes place, it is the laws of nature that alert us to the fact that it *is* a miracle. If we did not know the laws, we should never recognise a miracle if we saw one. Science therefore cannot rule out miracle, [in fact it helps us to identify one].

What he’s saying is, people who won’t believe in miracles, won’t believe in God. They’ve already decided that they will not accept a God who is able to intervene in this world (his world).

And what is interesting, we learn in the next chapter that there were witnesses, who saw this happen and told the Amorite Kings about it, and they were then terrified – there were non-Israelite witnesses.

Why did God do this in such a miraculous way? Was it only about getting past the river? Well no.

There are a couple of verses which make it clear that God wanted the people to trust Joshua, just as much as they trusted Moses. So God does the same miracle through Joshua as he did through Moses. He wants the people to follow Joshua as their leader. He also wants the people to know just how powerful he (God) is, and fear him. In the very final verse of chapter 4, Joshua tells the people “God did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God”. Joshua wants people to look back on this day for years to come, and us too! And to remember how powerful God is. Joshua does not expect God to do this sort of thing every day, but he does expect people to remember what God is like and because of this one event, to always remember God is wonderfully powerful.

So is that how you think of God? God is *really really* powerful, not only did he create the earth, with its mountains and rivers and deserts and cities, but he continues to control it, he can intervene!

God knows we are forgetful, and Joshua knows people are forgetful too! And God does not do this sort of thing every day – in fact as far as I’m aware he’s only ever done it twice! But this is written down so that we would know, so that people would remember! And the way that we think about God will be right, that we would know he is awesomely powerful. Now that’s the most important point from this passage, and if you have one image in your head to remember, it should be of that dried up river and people walking across it thinking wow isn’t God powerful!

But I’m going to, briefly, point out a few other things.

## 2) God is wonderfully holy.

This is an important point because it explains why we don’t see God face to face now,

I talked at the beginning about how people might feel far away from, or cut off from God. Well... why can’t we just see him face-to-face? That way we would know if he cared for us – we could be sure.

The problem is, if God appeared right before us now, if we saw him as he is, then we would die.

Even in the midst of this incredible moment, the crossing of the Jordan, even here, there has to be a distance between God and his people, because he is so pure and we are not.

Look down at v4, half way through Joshua commands:

“But keep a distance of about two thousand cubits between you and the ark; do not go near it”

That’s about 900m.

And if you haven’t thought about it that might seem a little funny, why do they need to keep away? Surely at this wonderful moment God would want his people close – and the ark symbolised his presence!

But even here, even now, there's the tension that a perfect and pure God, because of his holiness, cannot have sinful people come near. Even his own people.

And that's part of the story of the Scriptures, ever since Genesis chapter 3 when people began to reject God: we were cut off from his presence. Adam and Eve left the garden, and now we do *not* see God face to face. Day by day our relationship with him is *not* by sight and there's a distance (and that can be really hard and sometimes quite painful)

It could be that for some people here, that distance between you and God is something that you find really unsettling. That, because we are cut off from him, in one sense, that *is* what causes us to doubt his love for us or his goodness.

The good news is, the reason for that, is his holiness. God is totally pure and good and righteous – and he doesn't allow anything dirty in his presence, he can't, it's not even possible – it needs to be made (we need to be made) completely clean and perfect first.

And yet, lastly

### 3) God looks after his people

Again this will be more brief, but I think it's really important to say – because in our minds this holds a wonderful balance to the previous point.

This whole event, this narrative, teaches us about God's *care* and his *love* and his *protection* his *guidance*. God looks after his people

Firstly he leads them! v3 tells us that the plan was always for the ark to go first, the ark to be first into the Jordan (which at that precise moment still had water in it). And the people were to follow.

And v4, God says "Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before."

Tenderly, God leads his people.

But also God protects them! Look at 4v10 <sup>10</sup>"Now the priests who carried the ark remained standing in the middle of the Jordan until everything the Lord had commanded Joshua was done by the people, just as Moses had directed Joshua. The people hurried over, <sup>11</sup> and as soon as all of them had crossed, the ark of the Lord and the priests came to the other side while the people watched."

As you imagine it, you can imagine that people were pretty afraid! They might have thought "oh no, what happens if the water comes rushing back". But the ark, the symbolic presence of God, stops right in the middle – at the most dangerous point – and stays there. Everyone gets to crossover safely before God finishes the journey.

And the symbolism is clear: God stands in the breach, at the dangerous point, He protects and looks after the people. They are sheltered by him are protected by him.

Wonderful truths that were extremely good news for the Joshua and the Lord's people, and are extremely good news for us too! A God who leads his people, a God who protects his people? That's the God that we have.

He's also a God who gives his people victory. 3v10 before they actually cross over the river – Joshua says <sup>10</sup>"This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites."

You see, Joshua says – we can be sure the Lord will give us victory! If he looks after us across the river now, he'll look after us in battle! God will give us victory when we take the land!

And so throughout – we see that God is a God who looks after his people – yes they are sinful and he is holy – but they are *his* people, and he looks after them. If you are his people, he will look after you too!

Such encouragement. I hope it will shape how you think of God.

This moment was a big moment for God's people. After this day, it wasn't just the leader Joshua who trusted God, but as I said it's something of a transition moment, where the people show their trust in God and their confidence grows.

And God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. Their God is our God, this God, who halted the Jordan river in flood, and led his people across, is our God too.

So when those moments come when you find it hard to trust God, or you fear he doesn't care, or isn't with you. Be reassured! The reason you don't see God face to face is because of his holiness, and that's a good thing. One day (if you trust Jesus) you will stand before him completely blameless because of the cross, and you will see him face to face, and you too will be perfectly holy. But until that day, there is a distance, that's normal. But it is still true that God guides us, he protects us. He leads *you*! He is your protector, your guide, he loves you. And he *is* powerful. He can dry up the river. So he's *definitely* worth praying to, worth trusting, and worth following. Friends your powerful God is a great God, trust him, look to him, stand in awe of him.

Let's pray:

Father, we do stand in awe – we praise you for how you led your people across the Jordan, and we praise you that you care for us, you lead us, and you guide us! Keep us trusting your goodness, and knowing your power.

**Amen**